

Blended Learning@EdUHK - Stories from the Frontline

Description/Teaching Philosophy

TLS3003 is a foundation course that exposes students to the basic principles of curriculum planning and design, the various approaches to assessment, and alignment between intentions, enactment, and assessment of and for learning. It situates these principles in the context of recent education reforms in Hong Kong.

My aim was to employ Blended Learning (BL) strategies through a constructivist approach. Social constructivists have noted that dialogic acts are a means for participants to clarify thinking. Similarly, social cognitive theories posit meaningful learning as occurring when it involves the activation of – and linkage to – prior knowledge. Thus, the BL-specific objectives were to encourage students to:

- recursively build on prior knowledge and learning experiences,
- engage in dialogue and collaboration, and
- synthesize learning as they tackled the two major assessment components.

Sample Activities and Artefacts



On-line collaboration using Moodle and Google docs.

- The purpose of the group activity is to expand students' collective understanding of principles and practices that undergird curriculum and/or assessment policy initiatives in Hong Kong.
- Students were organized into major/discipline groups and given time to prepare a 20--25 minute presentation. Groups read about the selected policy, focusing on specific aspects (for example, catering to student diversity within the "Learning to Learn" Policy). Groups then used the Moodle group discussion forum to discuss questions, and collaborate to prepare for the presentation.
- I gave the groups a sheet that outlined different roles that each member could play. For example, one student could be in charge of readings, another would look at organization, etc.

On our Moodle page, I uploaded exemplars of Powerpoint slides created by groups in previous semesters. We discussed in class some pointers on "What makes an effective presentation?" and reviewed the grading rubric. The criteria included: understanding of topics/key concepts (50%) and critical thinking (30%).

Below is a screenshot of one of the more successful discussion forums. Based on their contributions, group members delegated parts of the presentation to individuals who showed interest in specific areas. On-line discussions became a means for students to funnel their ideas and delve deeply into a topic.

The discussion forums remained on-line for three weeks. During that time, I would read the students' comments and in class, I singled-out positive aspects of the groups' discussions. We intermittently reviewed the rubric to remind students of descriptors relating to criteria of critical thinking and understanding concepts. I also met with each group once to discuss their progress.



The screenshot shows three discussion forum threads. The first thread, titled "Re: Group 5: Liberal Studies", contains a student's question about implicit curriculum components. A yellow box highlights the student's use of vocabulary from readings. The second thread, also titled "Re: Group 5: Liberal Studies", contains a response discussing teaching goals and critical thinking. A yellow box highlights a follow-up comment from the student. The third thread, titled "Re: Group 5: Liberal Studies", contains a response discussing Bloom's Taxonomy. A yellow box highlights the student's application of concepts to school experiences.

Effectiveness and Lessons Learnt

The two BL activities served three purposes, for students to:

- recursively build on prior knowledge and learning experiences,
- engage in dialogue and collaboration, and
- synthesize learning

According to student feedback, preparing for the presentation helped them consider concepts with "breadth and depth". The activity enabled me to determine students' ongoing understanding of the content and give feedback, thus providing students with an example of formative assessment.

Requiring students to refer to our class discussions, previous lessons, readings, and their prior experiences lent coherence to the course over-all. As one student noted, the course requirements and other elements all "fit together."

The students' comments drew the TLS3003 team's attention to assessing the process and product of group presentations. This has led to formal revision of the group activity rubric to include participation and collaboration, with the formal adoption of BL as an assessed component of our course.

We are seeing more engagement among students both in class and on-line, which are contributing to the constructivist approach in our classroom teaching.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

- The BL activities also posed limitations. None of the groups used the "role assignment" structure that I had provided. Students had a tendency to initiate a conversation thread on Moodle, but others would reply to their ideas by starting another thread.
- Groups that did not participate in the discussion forums cited their partiality for other on-line platforms. Across my two TLS 3003 classes, at least two groups conducted their discussions via WhatsApp. They also shared their preference for conversing in Chinese.